



Lesson Plan: Connect Family Stories With History

OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is for use with the film *Calavera Highway*, which follows the road trip of two Mexican American men who reunite with their five brothers and try to piece together their family's history. Classrooms can use this lesson to connect the family experiences of students to larger events or periods in history.

P.O.V. documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

Please visit our Film Library at http://www.amdoc.org/outreach_filmlibrary.php to find other films suitable for classroom use or to make this film a part of your school's permanent collection.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Use viewing skills and note-taking strategies to understand and interpret a video clip.
- Identify and record information that provides historical context for the stories in the video clip.
- Research stories from their own families and put them in their historical contexts.
- Reflect in writing about their family's role in history, based on the story presented.

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECTS

U.S. History, Civics, Geography, Current Events, Language Arts

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Method (varies by school) of showing the class an online video clip
- Computers with access to the Internet
- Handout: [Student Guide](#) (PDF file)

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION

Two 50-minute class periods, plus some research time outside of class

SUGGESTED CLIP

Clip 1: [Lessons From Mom](#) (length 5:28)

The clip begins at 49:39 with the text “on the road to the Rio Grande Valley, Texas” and ends at 55:06 with the quote “CBS News at the Rio Grande Valley.”

BACKGROUND

History is often perceived as a collection of events involving distant people and places. This activity is an opportunity to personalize many historical time periods and events by

connecting them to the lives of students and their families. Doing so will not only boost student interest in historical topics, but can also strengthen each student's own sense of identity.

The lesson illustrates the process of connecting family experiences to history by using a video clip from the film *Calavera Highway* and some information from the Web on Chicano history. The video clip features memories and reflections of Armando and Carlos Peña, two of seven brothers who were raised in the poverty-stricken Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. The man they knew to be their father, a migrant worker from Mexico named Pedro Peña, returned to Mexico when the boys were very young, but it is unclear if he was deported or if he left for personal reasons. Their mother, Rosa, who is also of Mexican descent, worked and took care of Armando, Carlos and their five brothers. Rosa always insisted that she and her family be treated fairly no matter what. She would walk away from employers who mistreated them, organized the community around political candidates she supported, and encouraged Armando and his brother Luis when they participated in a student walkout in 1968 to protest conditions at Edcouch-Elsa High School. (See the "Resources" section for more details on the walkout.) These activities were all connected to a larger historic movement to improve civil rights for Chicanos in America.

ACTIVITY

1. Point out that history is often made up of activities from the lives of everyday people, including students and their family members. For example, in recent times, students may have someone in their family who has served in the war in Iraq, or perhaps a student's family has emigrated from another country as a result of economic or political turmoil. Additionally, a student's family member could have benefited from new medical technology. By expanding one's focus to extended family members, students may also see their family's connection to the Cold War, segregation, the Great Depression and other time periods and events.

2. Provide students with an example of connecting family experiences to history by showing Clip 1: Lessons From Mom from the film *Calavera Highway*. Before starting the clip, distribute copies of the Student Guide handout and introduce students to Armando and Carlos Peña, drawing details from the "Background" section in this lesson plan. Explain that after their mother died, Armando (wearing glasses in the film) and Carlos (wearing a yellow T-shirt, and later a gray one) went on a road trip to reunite with their five other brothers and learn more about their family history. As students watch, ask them to note on the Student Guide some of the things Armando and Carlos learned from their mother, Rosa, through their family experiences.

3. After the video clip, have students read about Chicano history on the P.O.V. website and note relevant details on the handout as directed.

4. Discuss the historical context for the family experiences shared in the video. How does knowing more about the life experiences of Armando, Carlos and their mother Rosa influence student understanding of Chicano history? How does knowing more about Chicano history help students better understand what this family experienced?

5. Ask students to research a story from their own families and place it in its historical context. Students can draw from their own experiences or those of living relatives or they can research a story on an ancestor using photographs, letters, journals, documents,

artifacts, newspaper clippings, oral history and other resources to gather details. Students should also research the historical contexts of these family experiences.

6. Have students organize their information in the same two-column format as the Student Guide, with the family story in the left column and the historical information in the right column.

7. When students have completed the assignment, post their papers on the wall in chronological order to create a class timeline. Provide some class time for students to circulate around the room and read some of the family experiences of their classmates.

8. Wrap up the activity by having students reflect in writing about their family's role in history based on the story they've presented.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Completion of the Student Guide.
- Quality of the research and the write-up of the family experience and its historical context.
- Written reflections about the assignment.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Create visual images to go along with the family experiences researched in the main activity of this lesson. Students could use computer graphics, paint, photography or another medium to represent key people, objects or places in the stories. Display these visuals in the class timeline next to the write-ups of student family experiences.
- Build music playlists that represent the identities or cultures of your students and their families. The P.O.V. website provides an example of such a [playlist](#), featuring Tejano music that is common on the Texas-Mexico border. Sample some of the Tejano songs for students, and discuss as a class what the music reveals about the people and lifestyle of that area. Then encourage students to work alone or in pairs to develop a playlist that relates to their own identity or culture. For each song on the playlist, students should describe why it was included and what it says about them.
- Help students further explore family relationships by having them write the story of a fictional road trip to visit some of their living relatives. Begin by watching *Calavera Highway* in its entirety and discussing what Armando and Carlos learn at each stop on their road trip. (*Note: This film contains mature themes. Please preview before classroom use.*) Then have students chart their own imagined journeys on a map, write about what happens during each visit with relatives and summarize what they learn about their families from the road trip.

RESOURCES

Edcouch-Elsa Walkout (1968)

<http://www.aaperales.com/school/walkout.html>

This teacher-created site aggregates primary source documents that describe what happened when Armando Peña and his peers walked out of classes at Edcouch-Elsa

High School in 1968 to protest conditions at the school. The site includes the student list of demands, photographs, a concise newspaper summary of events and more.

History of the Mexican -American People

<http://www.jsri.msu.edu/museum/pubs/MexAmHist/>

This online book from Professor Julian Samora provides an in-depth history of Mexican Americans.

My Journey Home

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/myjourneyhome/armando/>

Find out more about Armando Peña, including more about his role in the 1968 Edcouch-Elsa High School walkout, from an earlier PBS broadcast.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, beliefs and principles of American constitutional democracy.

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.

Geography

Standard 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place.

Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

Language Arts

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History

Standard 29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in journalism, secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as director of PBS Interactive's Education division, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and northern Virginia.

Background Source:

Calavera Highway, by Renee Tajima-Pena and Evangeline Griego.